## In Memory of Richard Cassell

And then the Windows failed — and then
I could not see to see —
Emily Dickinson

When I was going to school at Butler in the mid-seventies, I lived in Ross Hall on the third floor in the front above the main door with a window that looked out onto Hampton Street and the campus beyond. My roommate, Bob Sullivan, another English major, was trying to decide whether to follow Thomas Merton into the Trappist monastery or pledge the Tekes. To help him decide, he would make retreats to the abbey in Kentucky from time to time or disappear after a party at the house. Consequently, I was left alone much of the time, perched in the dorm. Many of you have heard me before, on my many trips back to Butler, carp about those times. The dorms were closed then, locked up tight at night. If one was not organized or didn't have a car, the highlight of the weekend would be watching David Letterman make fun of Jane Pauly while they did the news and weather at WISH TV on the big set in the basement common room. Then, after that, along with twelve other bored guys, one would recite the lines from Star Trek, committed to memory, as the reruns played on TV. Captain Kirk patiently explaining to another confused alien that "Man must struggle!"

I spent a lot of time in my room, reading. The chimes from the Holcomb Tower or, more often the case, the thumping refrain from "Stairway to Heaven" booming from the speaker in the windows of the Sigma Chi house next door would draw me to my window, and I would watch the traffic putter by below while dipping into Hardy's Wessex and reading about Tess's search for legitimacy and love.

Professor Cassell did not know I watched him from that window as he paraded home until I slipped and spilled my secret when I read here last year. I'd see him emerge from Jordan and plot a tangent that would take him across the parkway and the open field, where the new dorm is now, to an intersection with Hampton at the corner of Sunset. He moved as stately as a ship and, seen head on from my vantage, his feature's were as sharp as a ship's prow or as thin as the seam a mold leaves in a figure of chocolate or lead. At that angle he did seem almost two dimensional. Eygption, with his brief case, as heavy as a tool bag, plumb and steady at his side. His walk was a mixture of Groucho Marx and the samurai in Kurosawa films, all bounce in the knees with the legs flexed. He led with his chin, his pipe clenched in his teeth, a cross between Popeye and FDR. His face was as streamlined as a locomotive designed by Raymond Loewy, the beard scoured metallic, the forehead smoothed, the hair sculpted, Poundian and pounding for home, his head pulsing forward on his thin neck. Suddenly, he was right below me. And then the black felt derbies orbited around him in the air. They settled at his feet like fat cows. Squealing sorority women and fraternity men burst about him. The women snatched at the the derbis, tried to carry them away for charity. Dr. Cassell never broke stride, negotiated a course through this sargasso of undergraduates. I watched until I could see him no more as he slouched toward home.

This last winter, I flew out here to do a program, and Susan Neville picked me up at the airport. I was already thinking then what I would try to say here today. Driving into Butler, we went by Layfayette Mall, and I remembered I had bought my first wool top coat blue herring bone and padded shoulders, the works from a huge used clothing store in that neighborhood when I was at a student at Butler. I bought the coat, of course, because I wanted, just a little, to look like Professor Cassell. The top coat added to the impressive structure of those daily processions I witnessed. I studied with Dr. Cassell, it is true, but most of all I studied him.

Yes, it was in a night class he taught, a course on the short story, where I first read William Gass's "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country," and it changed my life and started me writing my own stories about Indiana. But I can't really remember anything specific he taught me about anything, any information or insights on texts. I turned out to be a writer not a scholar. What Professor Cassell gave me was not knowledge of characters in books but an interest in character itself and by extension a fascination with life, especially the minute gestures of living. The film director, John Ford, said of John Wayne, "Dammit, he just looked like a

man!" So it was with this man. He might have been a brilliant scholar, probaly was. He might have been an insightful critic, probably was. I don't know. I don't remember. I remember his bearing, his manner, his physical presence in the classroom, the way he seemed to kiss the words as he spoke them, how his hands drifted together as if he were praying while his gave slipped toward the window , and how his voice, that voice so low and smokey, seemed to rattle the metal fittings on those old fixed desks, a base line that sank the class deep into their seats. He made me see, which is my life's blood now, by watching him. What I saw, and this was physical alone, was style, grace, authority, and an aspect of vision. I wanted to know his story and, perhaps, be part of it.

I say this now, of course, because as a student of literature I was a pretty sorry specimen. In Dr. Cassell's American survey course I remember tying myself up in knots trying to interpret the symbolism of the insect in Dickinson's poem "I heard a fly buzz when I died." When I mentioned this to Dr. Baetzhold earlier he said, "Thought it was the soul or something?" Yes, yes, how did we know? It was that obvious. Dr. Cassell, I remember, talked me back to earth. He had walked out from behind his desk toward me and stood by the window. As I sputtered on, he stared out through the glass, asked a question that fogged the pane. What was it he said then? I can't remember. It doesn't matter what the poem means. Now I only remember the posture of the man, the light in the window, that soothing voice, the deep harmonic of its own buzz.

I also weaseled my way into an independent study with him. Ford Madox Ford. I ascribed to the theory that things would rub off if I just got nearby. But my performance was truly awful. I froze, couldn't write a thing because by that time I idealized Professor Cassell so much that nothing I wrote would be good enough. A terrible fate to befall a professor. A student hanging on every word, a goofy kid trying to impress instead of learn something. Right! I pretended to do

research in the library and was driven slowly mad with the drippy little fountain in the atrium. I'd hide in the stacks when Professor Cassell marched through, angling toward the rare book room to teach his graduate class. I'd watch him handle the books, watch him make notes. I told you there was not much doing on the campus then, and I'd hate to think that a student of mine stalks me now the way I stalked him. But then, we always live in the age of lead and my obsession had to do with the precious metal I assayed to the man. I had tinkered with his character in my imagination. I was screwed up for sure. It is not that I want to say that he was so great a teacher — he was a great teacher — but that, back then, he bore my school boy adoration with such finesse and care. He was finally himself, and that was truly fine.

I got a B in the independent study. I remember he wrote me a letter. I had transferred to IU by then. It said to write, write, write, learn how to spell, write, and write some more.

I told Susan, as we drove by the shopping center where that used clothing store had been, the conventional wisdom of buying second-hand holds that you want the clothes of someone who has died. The living only give away the things when they are worn-out or out grown. The best stuff comes from the dead. I walked around Butler's campus for three years in a dead man's coat, shadowing the man I wanted to become, a pale ghost. I tried to rig a life for myself from the scraps I found as I followed in his wake. What more can a student ask for? Now, I do remember something from one of his classes, the short story course, where we read Gogol's "The Overcoat." I remember what Professor Cassell said Turgenev said about the story. "We all come from beneath 'The Overcoat.' " Indeed.

Bob Sullivan, my roommate, did pledge Teke. It was the age of streaking, and Bob was kicked out of school for awhile when he was caught with a band of brothers streaking, strolling really, through the lobby of Switzer on parents' weekend. He was never really happy in the house and would come back over to the dorm every once and awhile. He kept his phonograph records in my room, including some albums of Gregorian chants. One spring day, while the Sigma Chis were playing Iron Butterfly again for the neighborhood, I hoisted Bob's stereo speakers into my windows and cranked up the Benedictine Monks to compete against the heavy metal with their monotonic howling. Dr. Cassell was walking by on his way home. The angelic host weaved its Latin plosives between an electric guitar feedback, a solo lick. I saw Dr. Cassell stop, cock his head to listen, and look up toward my window. I saw him looking for the music. He would have loved the juxtaposition, the sacred and the profane. I love this memory most of all. This little squall on his daily voyage home that broke his stride. And that is always how I'll remember him: watching that stomping walk of his as he walked away to the beat of the music of the spheres. Can you see him? Can you see him turning now and walking once more for home?

**Michael Martone**